

Rochester City School District Peer Assistance Review Program

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Abstract

In this paper the author evaluates the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program in the Rochester City School District, Rochester, NY. The author evaluates the system's strengths and weaknesses and discusses the program's alignment with New York State requirements.

In an overview of the New York State Mentor Teacher Internship Program with comparison to the Rochester City School District (RCSD) Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program, there are noted similarities and the RCSD seems to do a good job of abiding by procedures prescribed by the State. The State mentor requirement has been developed to ensure that new teachers are given the opportunity to fully evolve into pedagogical leaders and ultimately serve the students as effective educators (New York State Education Department, 2010). The RCSD program was developed in 1988, prior to State requirements, as a motivating tool to support incoming teachers due to the high turnover rate in the school district, but again with the ultimate goal of creating a sustainable system for the students (Rochester City School District, 2008).

In theory, and based on physical data from the school district, the RCSD PAR program is highly developed and effective. When originally conceived, it was a joint project between the Administration and the Rochester Teacher's Association (RTA). The development of the program, as highlighted by the Superintendent of the school and the President of the RTA, desires to be effective in developing "a highly skilled, empowered faculty" and beneficial to "our present and future colleagues, and especially our children" (Rochester City School District, 2008). The Mentor Handbook provided by the district outlines a defined formula of expectations for mentors and interns. Formal forms are provided for continuous evaluation, reflection, and development of the intern throughout the school year. These forms provide feedback and evidence of "program focus on the mentor/intern

relationship” as stated as an essential component of the State mentor program (New York State Education Department, 2010).

The RCSD has been recognized nationally by the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and one of the highlights of the program that is highly recognized by the study is that the mentors for the RCSD program are current teachers, many of whom mentor within their own building (Flarman et al, n.d.). In theory, this program serves a two way purpose as lead teachers are able to share their expertise and experiences with novice teachers while remaining grounded in their own classrooms. In turn, it allows the interns to benefit from peer evaluation, assistance, and guidance, many times from teachers within their own building.

As I have demonstrated from internal and external sources, the RCSD PAR program is designed with the best intentions and fulfills most of the State requirements for mentoring programs. However, I find a true dichotomy when comparing the literature with actual teacher experiences and insight in the program. In conversations with several teachers who have been required to go through the mentoring process I found some of their experiences to be extremely positive. They spoke about finding mentors to be helpful, supportive, engaging, and encouraging in many aspects of the day to day challenges of being an urban city teacher (K.Zuroski, T.Guy, personal communication, June 28, 2010).

However, on the other hand I also found teachers who spoke of frustration with the process and stated that the mentor relationship they had led to more physical and emotional stress more than anything (J.Oliveri, J. Occhino, personal communication, June 28, 2010). When asked why they thought that their

experiences were contrary to the program's vision, it seemed to be a common theme that there was a disconnect in both philosophy of teaching and school environment as the teachers I spoke with who had negative experiences did have mentors from schools other than their own. I am not suggesting that standards for teaching or students be changed in any one situation but I believe any good lead teacher should be able to understand and be adapt their techniques to different environments and it is in this area of the RCSD PAR program that may need to be revisited to ensure that mentors are able to step outside of their own comfort zone and look into new environments with an openness that is both productive and reflective for both parties. Like any good administrator, a mentor must be able to impart their own philosophy to novice teachers while at the same time empowering the teachers to make their own choices that are in the best interests of the students.

As laid out by New York State standards, the RCSD goes beyond its requirements for providing mentoring services for novice teachers. The RCSD mentor program is nationally recognized by a premier college and used as an example for other districts. It is poignantly structured with pieces of evaluation and self-reflection that allow professional growth and development for novice teachers, as well as the ability for a district to retain good teachers for extended periods of time. Where it is deficient, the district seems to lack the culpability of providing the majority of interns with highly proficient lead teachers. From an inside point of view, the program seems irregular in its effectiveness throughout the district and like many other programs that serve the district you may find exemplary

mentor/intern relationships in one school, but quite the opposite in another of the same district.

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